



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Grasslands Wildlife Management Area Expansion Study

Planning Update 5, July 2005

Greetings

This is the final planning update from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announcing the decision to expand the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area in Merced County, California.



Pintails
USFWS



Blooming doweringia. USFWS

What is the Final Decision?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has decided to implement Alternative 3, the Preferred Alternative, as described in the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area (WMA) Proposed Expansion Environmental Assessment, Land Protection Plan, and Conceptual Management Plan.

The decision is documented in the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). The selected alternative expands the approved WMA boundary by 46,400 acres. The decision concludes the planning process for WMA expansion. The Service can now begin to protect habitat within the expansion area by negotiating with and purchasing conservation easements from landowners who are willing sellers.

The habitat within the 46,400-acre expansion area is important to migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, sandhill cranes, and threatened and endangered species including four species of freshwater crustacea, the San Joaquin kit fox, and the blunt-nosed leopard lizard.

It is the established policy of the Service to acquire easements, lands, or interests in lands from willing sellers. Purchasing easements will proceed according to the availability of funds. If you have questions, contact Kim Forrest, her contact information is on the last page.

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Are the Planning Documents Available?

The Grasslands WMA Proposed Expansion Environmental Assessment (EA), Land Protection Plan, and Conceptual Management Plan are available, as well as the Finding Of No Significant Impact (FONSI). The EA includes the Service's responses to comments on the draft planning documents received during the public comment period. Copies of the documents are available by request from the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex by calling (209) 826-3508, or by writing to San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex, P.O. Box 2176, Los Banos, CA 93635. These documents are also available on the Service's website at <http://pacific.fws.gov/planning>.

What Were the Results of Public Review?

Nine people attended the public meeting held in Merced on June 21, 2004. The main questions raised concerned the price of easements, the terms and conditions of the easements, and the effect of the WMA expansion on landowners who are not

interested in participating in the easement program. The Service also received 6 letters which mainly questioned the effect of easements on farmland, and offered corrections or suggestions to the EA. All comments were responded to in the EA. The three most common questions with responses follow.

1. How Would the Expansion Affect Landowners with Property Located Within the Expanded WMA Boundary?

The WMA expansion provides landowners an opportunity to sell a conservation easement on all or part of their property to the Service on a willing seller basis at fair market value, and preserve California's important wildlife habitat, open space, and agricultural and rural life style. In exchange for payment, landowners agree to maintain wetlands and other habitats on their property in perpetuity. The WMA easement lands remain in private ownership and are not opened for public access. Landowners who do not wish to sell an easement are under no obligation to do so, are not required to participate in the easement program, and would have no restrictions related to the WMA boundary imposed on their land.



Native rangeland and vernal pool. USFWS

2. What restrictions would be placed on my land if the WMA expansion is approved and I choose to participate in the easement program?

If a landowner chooses to sell an easement on all or part of their property to the Service, the landowner agrees to maintain wetlands and other important habitats on their property in perpetuity. Working together, the landowner and the Service develop conservation easement terms and conditions that define and limit land uses that can harm or degrade fragile wildlife habitats. Land uses that are normally restricted include the following.

- Development rights (residential, industrial, etc.).
- Alteration of the area's natural topography.
- Uses which adversely affect the area's flora and fauna.
- Crop type (cereal grains, corn, etc.).
- Alteration of natural water regimes.

3. Would property values be considerably higher on lands that were excluded from the approved WMA boundary when compared to included lands?

Based upon past experience, we have found that land values on private lands within or surrounding an approved WMA boundary are not influenced by the presence of the boundary. In all instances, landowners both within and surrounding an approved WMA boundary have the right and opportunity to continue the existing property use as well as explore other economic uses. The market value of any property is based upon its potential use and what properties of a comparable nature have recently sold for within the market area. Other factors such as local governmental zoning and regulations can have a significant impact on the potential use and market value of an individual property. It is our experience that the existence of a WMA has not demonstrated any adverse effect on individual property values.



Up to one million waterfowl overwinter in the Grasslands. USFWS

Thank you for participating in the planning process for the Grasslands WMA expansion. Please contact us for more information.

For information on the Grasslands WMA contact:

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Loren Ruport, Wildlife Biologist
San Luis NWR Complex
P.O. Box 2176
947 West Pacheco Blvd.
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For Information on Easement Acquisitions Contact:

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Address correction requested